BIRTH CONTROL OF MEDICAL JOURNALS

Farrokh Habibzadeh

Immediate Past President, World Association of Medical Editors
Founder and Editor-in-Chief, The International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (The IJOEM).
Address for Correspondence:
Dr. Farrokh Habibzadeh
Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz - Iran
NIOC Health Organization, Medical Education and Research Center, Shiraz - Iran
E-mail: farrokh.habibzadeh@theijoem.com

This article may be cited as: **Habibzadeh F. Birth control of medical journals. J Postgrad Med Inst 2015; 29(2): 65-6.**

Medical journals are among the most important means of dissemination of new scientific information across physicians and researchers worldwide. Many clinicians shape their treatment strategies based on evidence-based medicine principles, which in turn, seriously rely on research articles published in these journals. The question arise is how reliable are the results of the published articles in these journals?

Nowadays, launching a new journal is very easy. Thanks to inexpensive desktop publishing technology, the Web site of a good-looking journal can be developed within a couple of hours. Over the past 30 years, many journals on different disciplines have mushroomed the globe. Middle Eastern countries were not spared from this pandemic and have witnessed a publishing boom[1]. For example, while there were less than 10 medical journals almost 30 years ago in Iran, the number of titles now exceeds 450. Similar trend can be observed in many countries of the region where more than 600 medical journals are currently published regularly[2].

The raison d'être for publishing these journals is variable; some universities in the region have established their own journals only to provide a framework for career promotion of their faculty members by publishing their articles. Nonetheless, because publication of many of these journals is not based on scientific grounds, the quality of these journals is generally unacceptable. Running these journals by inexperienced editors makes the quality even worse. Most of the editors of these journals have not been trained for their position. Even those editors who have got a superficial knowledge of the craft are generally not successful enough in running their journals; there is difference between knowing the path and walking the path[3].

The quality and credibility of medical journals are supposed to be monitored by an independent organization. For example in Iran, one of the countries in the region that has had the steepest rise in the number of newly established scientific journals in the Middle East during the past three decades, the quality of medical journals is monitored by the Commission for Accreditation and Improvement of Iranian Medical Journals affiliated to the Iranian Ministry of Health and Medical Education. This Commission is also responsible for granting permission for establishing new medical journals and had done so generously until a couple of years ago when they decided to audit the process more meticulously.

Another important reasons why new journals are launched here and there, is to make money. Over the past decade, considering the need for publication of articles by faculty members in indexed journals, many open-access medical journals, the so-called "predatory journals,"[4] have been launched round the globe, the main reason behind the publication of these bogus journals is making money. Some of these journals will publish almost everything you submit, no matter the scientific merit of the manuscript submitted. An important factor that in part helps promotion of these journals is laxity of some indexing systems for covering the journals and some inappropriate rules for promotion of faculty members.

PubMed Central (PMC) is a repository of medical articles hosted by the US National Library of Medicine. Only two medical journals from Iran were accepted by PMC between 2010 and 2013. This number had increased to 33 titles between 2010 and 2013[5]. This dramatic increase in the number of journals covered by PMC should by no means be construed as that significant improvement in the quality of Iranian medical journals over the mentioned period; these journals could simply find the way

to create the necessary XML files essential for being indexed in PMC.

Being covered by PMC does not necessarily mean that the scientific quality of the journal is also acceptable. However, articles published in the indexed journals will become visible in the PubMed search side by side to those articles published in journals indexed by MEDLINE, the most prestigious indexing system of biomedical journals. Readers of journals indexed in PMC, who presume that they can completely rely on the results they retrieved from the PubMed, the portal developed by the US National Library of Medicine, affiliated to NIH, would therefore, be misled. The body of evidence would be jeopardized and evidence-based medicine would no longer be beneficial. Surprisingly, many medical faculties in the Eastern Mediterranean region assign similar promotion points to an article retrievable from the PubMed no matter it is published in PMC or MEDLINE.

Originally, the real reason behind publishing a journal was to inform physicians and researchers of scientific news. Thereafter, to assess the process quantitatively, some organizations, say Thomson Reuters (formerly ISI), were established and citation analyses have been used for scientometrics. In today's world, these scientometrics are commonly used to compare contribution of nations to world science production. However, these metrics have been misinterpreted by some policymakers. To seek an appropriate position in the race of science production by nations, many low and middle-income countries set the goals in their national scientific strategic plans solely based on these scientometrics rather than the real needs of their country. They do really not care about the usefulness of the produced research articles; for them, that is enough that they can publish their journals even if the journals contain useless articles on repetitive topics, as long as they are indexed in some indexing systems whose reports are counted in ranking countries.

It seems that the order of reasons for publishing a scientific journal in the Middle East has been reversed in most instances. In many countries of the region, the journals are mainly published to promote the authors in the first place, to be indexed to increase the number of publications from the country of origin in the second place, and lastly to disseminate scientific news and promote the boundaries of science, if possible at all.

The regional policymakers should think about ways to increase their supervision on the quality rather than quantity of scientific journals published in the region. Effective strategies should be developed to control the birth of new scientific journals. It might be true that quality comes after quantity, but such a large laxity in letting all low-quality journals being published (even if they are covered by certain indexing systems) is not satisfactory at all. Days would be come when finding credible scientific data would be as difficult as finding a pearl in an ocean.

REFERENCES

1. WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. IMEMR journals directory [Online]. 2015 [cited on 2015 Mar 5]. Available from URL: http://applications.emro.who.int/library/im-journals/
2. Habibzadeh F. Scientific research in the Middle East [Online]. 2014 [cited on 2015 Mar 5]. Available from URL: http://www.thelancet.com/pb/assets/raw/Lancet/global-health/middle-east/Mar14_MiddleEastEd.pdf
3. Habibzadeh F. Professionalism in biomedical journalism: noblesse oblige. Natl Med J India 2013;26:242-3.
4. Pai SA. Medical journals – in the news and for the wrong reasons. Indian J Med Ethics 2014;11:7-9.
5. Commission for Accreditation and Improvement of Iranian Medical Journals. List of indexed journals. [Online]. 2015 [cited on 2015 Mar 5]. Available from URL: http://hbi.ir/info/Commission/Indexing.xls